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ABSTRACT

This paper consists of observations on a China tour to nursery schools, children's hospitals, primary schools, a high school, a teacher training institute, after-school children's centers and a school for the deaf. Twenty American early childhood education specialists participated in the tour, which included visits to five cities and to rural areas. The possibility that any or all of the schools visited may be showcase institutions is discussed. The most noticeable feature of schooling in China was the emphasis on moral education or the direct teaching of explicit values. Also of interest to the observers: the formal pedagogical style (children in art class, for example, all copy the same picture) and the emphasis on physical education. The children appeared happy and alert, paying close attention to all that went on. There was little sign of the restiveness many have come to expect in a formal school setting. (MS)

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CURRICULUM PRACTICES IN PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

SOME FIRST-HAND OBSERVATIONS

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I

In the month of January, 1975, I participated in a tour of preschool and primary school settings in The People's Republic of China. I traveled with twenty Americans, all experienced in the field of early childhood education. We visited nursery schools, children's hospitals, a high school, primary schools, a teacher training institute, after school children's centers and a school for the deaf.

We were in the cities of Peking, Tientsein, Nanking, Soochow and Shanghai. Much of our time was spent in rural areas. As part of the tour we also visited cultural sites, factories and work places, went to the opera, and saw a film which was currently popular, "The Bright Shining Red Star." We were assigned three permanent translators to our group. They stayed with us for the duration of our trip in China, and made arrangements for connections in other cities that had their own brances of the travel service. Our guides from the travel service (Luxsinghe) were genuinely helpful individuals who were friendly and even, at times, relaxed and informal, thus validating the importance of people-to-people education. It is important to address the question of how much of the real China we saw. It is clear that we saw only a very little because China has land mass larger than United States with eight autonomous regions and over one hundred ethnic minorities. It is clearly a country of wide regional and cultural differences. The issue is whether or not the China we saw was representative. I would argue

that it was, because of the large number of different settings we were in, and from reports of other American visitors who have seen very similar educational practices but visited different settings. My only feeling of a "show case" institution was in Peking Nursery School Number 5, which appears to be a standard visiting place for tours. Another piece of evidence suggests that we saw "representative" places was the travel services' constant attempt to accommodate our requests to visit places we wanted to see as a function of our special interest.

Our school visits had a certain regular pattern: after a warm welcome, we would meet with the responsible people at the site, talk with them briefly, then have a look around, and then have a further in-depth question and answer period. Since one of our purposes of the tour was an official delegation of friendship, we also gave schools that we visited small presents of books and records.

Question and answer sessions between our group and the Chinese were generally informative and the atmosphere was friendly and the exchange open. The difficulty, of course, was in coping with each other as fellow Americans; I sometimes felt like Mark Twain's Innocence Abroad and worse. The other issue is the political nature of the travel service; their goal is to show The People's Republic of China in its best light, with enthusiasm and persuasion. This is why background information on what is happening in The People's Republic currently is so important for understanding. For example, the importance of the Great Cultural Proletarian Revolution, the continued leadership of Chairman Mao, and the movement to criticize Lin Piao and Confuscious are such consistent themes in the rhetoric of the travel service, that it would seem essential

to have prior knowledge of some of the events and issues. A constant theme we heard in discussion groups about the nature of the curriculum in schools, for example, was the significance in changes that had taken place as a result of cultural revolution. Finally, one must, it would seem, approach the process of being toured about by the travel service with an openness and sense of humor. The itinerary allows for little free time, little time to be by oneself, and a constant changing view of sites, events and discussions. It was important to try and learn and to consensually validate what was going on with American peers. For example, one evening our head permanent guide announced with a particularly pleasing smile that we were privileged to see a "propaganda" film that was current fare at the cinemas, but had been brought to the hotel by friends from the local theater. Indeed we had seen billboards for "The Bright Shining Red Star" and it was recently featured in China Reconstruct Magazine. But the thought of seeing a propaganda movie as a "special treat" was indeed somewhat disconcerting or at least presented a contrast in social reality.

II

There are several observations I would like to share with you about what I perceive to be the nature of preschool and primary school education curriculum and practices in China at this time in history. These observations are based on my first hand experiences in The People's Republic, and, of course, are limited by this. Furthermore, the observations are also a function of the fact that I carry observer biases. It is clear that I may have misunderstood many things, missed important

information or read meaning into events from my own ethnocentric world view. I was not a cultural anthropologist in China, rather an American early childhood education specialist in China. To help correct for my limitations, I read extensively before and after my trip. I would recommend two general readings which have appeared to clarify much: From The Other Side of the River, A Self Portrait of China Today by K. H. Fan and K. T. Fan; and China! Inside the People's Republic by the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars. In the specific there is a paucity of literature on schools in China; however, there is a chapter on schools in the Fans' book and I would also recommend Daily Life In Revolutionary China by Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, especially a chapter entitled "Mao's Children."

Now for my observations:

The most noticeable feature about schooling is the emphasis on moral development or the direct reaching of explicit values.

The content of language lessons, the production of playlets, the lyrics to songs, the purpose of science lessons, the art lessons and the inclusion of exercises in productive labor are geared to Maoist moral education. A good example of this was in a kindergarten classroom in Tientsien in which the children put on a playlet for us entitled, Big Apple for Little Brother. Five children came on the stage in costume, and sang a chorus. Then the protagonist, older sister, sets the scene. She has a basket of apples that she hands out to the group of brothers and sisters one by one. At the end she comes to a classic moral dilemma for young children; two apples left, a large one and a small one, one for her and one for little brother. Which one should she keep for herself?

In song she reviews the moral dilemma, and decides that he needs the food more than she because he is still growing, and she gives the larger apple to him in a selfless act.

The example of the importance of productiveness was taught in a very direct manner. In a different Primary School in Tientsien, fourth and fifth grade children work an hour each day folding cardboard T's that fit into toothpaste boxes to keep the tube from rattling in the box. For this service the school is paid by the factory. And finally in all language lessons we heard, the texts were stories of heroism during the time of the revolution.

An interesting commentary on this direct teaching of values was underscored in a meeting with Talitha Gurlach in Snanghai. This interesting American born woman has lived in China since pre-revolutionary days, when she was a YWCA worker, and has continued consulting to the Chinese Ministry of Education and working for the Chinese information services. In a meeting with us she said that it was the goal of the Chinese educational system to directly stamp out any vestiges of bourgeois ideology and to educate children to the correct path toward building a socialist man.

Secondarily to the direct training of values, is the formal pedagogical style in which, from an early age, children do choral reading, group recitation and rehearse and perform playlets. I do not want to give the impression that this appears to be oppressive in any way. It does not. It simply appears formal.

In art class, for example, children all copy the same picture of Tien An Min Square. Or in English class children read in unison. One

abacus lesson stands out in particular: The teacher held up a flash card with the problem. The children responded with a clatter of moving beads and then hands went up. The teacher called on several different children who shouted out the correct answer from their independent calculations.

A third striking feature is the emphasis on physical training. Children spend much of their school time practicing formal physical fitness training. This is seen in gymnastic exercises and games, such as running relays, doing song and dance routines. These appeared to me to always be at an exceptionally high performance level.

These observations all clearly fit in with Mao's doctrines of physical, moral and intellectual development, and these three observations are hardly speculative. From what I can tell, they are also similar to the observations of others.

A final observation, however, is more puzzling and has to do with school behavior of children that Jack Kounin and others called with-it-ness. In all of the school settings in which we observed, children, even down to age three, appeared to be alert, tuned in, and paying attention to the ongoing activities. This was true also of the children as they watched their peers perform in playlets, or when others were reciting in front of the class. There appeared to this observer little evidence that the children were restive under a familiar oppressive regime of "school," as we have sometimes characterized in our society. We frequently remarked on how well the children performed, how alert they were, and how happy they seemed. How is that the children seem so at ease in their performances, so well-disciplined, so eager? Our guides felt that this stemmed from a

feeling of confidence and trust in their country. They were pleased to see us judge the children so positively and equally pleased to use the children's behavior as evidence of the success of the goals of the educational system. Clearly, this was only part of the picture. Children in China are also experiencing an era of incomparable prosperity, especially in contrast to the time previous 1949. It seems clear too, that parents' family life, now also prosperous, supports the child. Everywhere children appeared well-fed, well-clothed, and well-cared for. In all of the time of our tour I never saw a child scolded, reprimanded or even spoken harshly to. Responsible children often attended our seminars and responded to our questions. The attitudes teachers, as professionals, expressed toward the children was loving, kind and understanding. Once in a performance of a playlet a child forgot her lines. The teachers waited patiently and smiled and the child proceeded. In one primary school we visited the children appeared a little wild -- the principal's attitude was tolerant and humanistic -- they need to run off some energy on the play yard. "You know how children are don't you?" she said.

A final statement about these observations: I do not wish to join the ranks of instant American Sinologists who return from tours of China and view children in China with awe and jealousy; nor do I want to rail against the uniformity and limited political rhetoric they are being taught. I simply want, on making good a promise made to the members of the travel services and Chinese school teachers I met, to share some of my observations with you.

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